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CARA BERGER

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NVA's Hinterland
Photo: Alan McAteer, courtesy of NVA

The tagline 'A Future Reclaimed' signals in advance that NVA's *Hinterland*, a performance in the ruins of St Peter's Seminary at Kilmahew, seeks to cultivate our ability to imagine the future by linking it to remainders of the past. The train ride from Glasgow to Helensburgh—from which spectators are taken by minibus to the site—already provides ample opportunities for ruin gazing. Clydebank, a town synonymous with Scotland's decimated shipbuilding industry, a spat of uninhabited brutalist houses near Dalmuir, the carcasses of disused fishing boats scattered along the banks of the Clyde and, of course, the seminary itself prompt a reflection on the strange temporality of ruins and what role they might play for us in the present and the

future. In their introduction to the recent 'On Ruins' edition of *Performance Research*, Carl Lavery and Richard Gough argue that ruins disturb the modernist ideal of linear and sequential time. Ruins insist on the presentness of the past, while also calling attention to the ruination of the present since 'the ruin [...] is something that is already ruined in advance, an object that unfolds itself in the tense of the future anterior, the time of the will have been' (2015, 4). In performance, as in ruin gazing, we become aware of the slippage of the present moment into the past. In turn, we realise that the present contains its future ruination; that we, the spectators, are in the process of being ruined. This ontological affinity between ruins and performance is also at the heart of *Hinterland*.

The performance marked both the opening of Scotland's Festival of Architecture and the final opportunity to see St Peter's Seminary in its current state ahead of a large-scale regeneration of the building spearheaded by NVA. Famed for their site-specific public artworks, often encompassing light, sound and performative elements, NVA are committed to an 'ideal of a lively democracy' (NVA, n.d.). With the support of Heritage Lottery Fund, Creative Scotland, Historic Environment Scotland and Argyll and Bute Council, St Peter's Seminary will become a permanent home where this mission statement might be enacted through a programme of creative events from 2018 onwards, following partial restoration of the building. The choice of site is not incidental; located at a distance from Scotland's creative hubs in the central belt in a forest a little north of Cardross, a village with a population of just over 2,000 inhabitants, the seminary is a refuge from the everyday bustle of Scotland's larger cities. Its relative inaccessibility and peripherality lend it an air of otherworldliness where new and unprecedented visions of the future can be invented.



NVA's *Hinterland*
Photo: Alasdair Smith, courtesy of NVA

The original building (designed by Andy MacMillan and Isi Metzstein) is often viewed as one of the most brilliant examples of modernist architecture in Scotland. It exemplifies modernism's obsession with 'unidirectional time' that flows towards 'newness and completeness' as David Archibald and Johnny Rodger analyse (2015, p.111). Built in 1966 as an educational institution for Roman Catholic priests, it was abandoned just fourteen years later, in 1980, and the building is now derelict. NVA's intention is not to restore the building to its former glory but to embrace its ruination. This acknowledges that in the contemporary, postmodern period futurity can no longer be premised on an erasure of the past as it was in modernism. Rather, in order to imagine a future, we must now start with a messier approach towards temporal processes.

Consequently, *Hinterland* is preoccupied with time, decay and regeneration. Throughout the performance, which takes spectators on a designated walking route through the building and the surrounding woodlands, temporalities collide. The beginning, where a foot trail through the woods is accompanied by a soundscape composed of the clanging

of tools on metal and stone, fragments of choral song and faint footsteps, is an example. By calling forth the ghosts of the labourers who constructed the seminary, trainee priests who may have sung there and the illicit wanderings of ruin explorers who flocked to the site after official activities in the building ceased, a nodal point between the past and the present is created. Simultaneously, these sounds point towards a speculative future where builders and audiences will populate the site once again, conjuring spectres of a time to come.

NVA responds to the multifarious temporalities of the site by creating a plethora of images that seem impossibly dense, in which myriad temporal layers co-exist at once. This is most apparent in the focal image, located in the former altar room at the centre of the building. A large metal structure, operated by performers in welding helmets, has been hung from the ceiling. Part-pendulum, part-censer, the construct swings hypnotically above a flooded floor space that mirrors precisely the scene above it, giving the impression of a bottomless pit while choral music (composed by Rory Boyle, recorded by the St Salvator's Chapel Choir of the University of St Andrews) erupts at irregular intervals.



NVA's Hinterland
Photo: Alasdair Smith, courtesy of NVA

Spectators encounter this scene three times, from three different angles. Each time the mood changes. The solemn image morphs into an ecstatic one when the side-on living quarters above are illuminated in flashes of purple, blue and green. The final encounter exposes the performance's mechanics: what appeared as an altar is revealed to be a lighting desk. This Dante-esque dramaturgy—in which the spectator ascends from the underworld to knowledge—mimics religious creed but does not reproduce it. It instils a sense of hope and elation through an acceptance of material existence, rather than through transcendence of it.

Hinterland, which NVA has called a manifesto more than a performance, argues for the value of ruins and ruination. In the encounter with the ruin the human is humbled as we come to understand ourselves as transient creatures whose future is always being eroded. At the same time, as *Hinterland* succeeds in showing, it is precisely this erosion that opens up the possibility of new futures, even of the very idea of a future to be regained.

In the current turn towards ruins in contemporary theatre scholarship, seen in the mounting number of publications and conferences that address both site-specific performances in ruins and ruination as a function of performance, this piece cannot be overlooked as an important and provocative example of ruin performance.¹ *Hinterland* and NVA's plans for St Peter's Seminary are a timely meditation on how we might begin to make futures and what both ruins and performance can contribute to this.

Notes

1. Growing interest in ruins can be seen through the publication of the special edition 'On Ruins' by *Performance Research* already cited, the recent call for papers on 'Tragedy and the dramaturgy of ruins' issued by the Directing and Dramaturgy Working Group of The Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) as well as a forthcoming book by Simon Murray on performances in ruins as part of Deirdre Heddon and Sally Mackey's series *Performing Landscapes* (Palgrave).

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About the review author

CARA BERGER teaches Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow. She has a background as a theatre-maker and has completed a practice-as-research PhD (2014) that draws on *écriture féminine* to frame postdramatic theatre aesthetics in relation to feminist politics. Her research focuses on postdramatic theatre, feminism and critical theory in the first place. She is also increasingly interested how these fields might resonate with pressing questions of ecology, matter and ways of living in a more-than-human world. She has recently published articles on these subjects in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Performance Research* and *Platform*.